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AUTHOR Evans, Ronald V.
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ABSTRACT

Poetry therapy is the method of therapy based on the principle that a poem is a special medium for expressing emotions and that this expression can have psychotherapeutic value. A survey taken in 1973 showed there were over 400 therapists treating 3,500 drug addicts, alcoholics, and mental retardates around the country. Poetry therapists discourage their pupils from overconcern with stylistics which engender a sense of artificial double think; they make great use of the fact that we are symbolic beings, capable of emotionally understanding far more than words alone can communicate. At present, there are four ways to run a therapy session: (1) provide group members with varied poetry selections to read and respond to, (2) provide members with poems of a similar mood or topic, (3) have members write poetry round robin style, and (4) have members write and react to each other's work of original poetry written during the session. Poetry therapy can also be used in the English program classroom as a way to reach disadvantaged students, as a means of promoting a better communication between upper grade students and lower grade students, as an extracurricular activity, and as an extremely humanistic method of getting into the study of poetry. (TS)

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POETRY THERAPY

Ronald V. Evans
Associate Professor--English
University of West Florida

What is it? Poetry as most teachers know has long been associated with emotion. Wordsworth called poetry "emotion recollected in tranquility," and T. S. Eliot reminds us that "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion...not an expression of a personality, but an escape from personality." I. A. Richards, in fact, explained that poetry is a harmonizing agent that keeps the fine balance among all our appetites and their fulfillment. Clearly then, if poets and critics confirm the poetry-emotion connection, it should be no surprise that psychologists have begun using poetry as a means of balancing the emotion of people with problems.

This new strategy dubbed "Poetry Therapy" by its founders, Jack Leedy and poet Ed Griefer, functions on the psychiatric principle articulated years ago by Freud who claimed that poets express "from the whirlpool of emotions the deepest truths to which we others have to force our way ceaselessly groping among tortuous uncertainties." Psychiatrist Leedy explains that there is a poet in everybody, and from everybody's "whirlpool of emotions" can come "deepest truths" that need expression and benefit others who choose to hear them. As Leedy points out "instead of rationalizing, projecting, compensating, or identifying, we can deal with the poem as a person in a non threatening manner." In poetry therapy, therefore, the poem itself becomes a very special medium for expressing or for reflecting emotions. The natural defense mechanisms that frequently hold back free expression of pent up emotions seem to melt away when dealing with a poem, because a poem is really very accommodating to any response, not even demanding much more than basic language skills to play this game.

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Poetry therapy makes great use of the fact that we are symbolic beings, capable of emotionally understanding far more than words alone communicate. Since a poem has a life of its own, it can elicit responses on its own terms. We go through a complete cycle with the poet, following his path of conflict to resolution through expressing himself in the piece. In this sense, a poem is not unlike the daily soap operas that offer vicarious human relations scenarios to homebound housewives who need this sort of experience to complete their emotional and social lives.

Of course, the poem in poetry therapy is not intended to key-hole-peep or sensationalize as are many soaps. Instead, as another psychologist named Crootof points out, "the poet's feelings function as a resonator in the patient's psyche; where the corresponding fragments of memory and experience start to vibrate sympathetically, are shaken loose from their submerged mooring, and rise to the surface where they can be looked at in the daylight of reality."

The idea is simply that when you put troubled people in a reasonably comfortable situation, introduce provocative poetry, and actively draw out responses, you may help them to communicate, to get some of the inner frustrations out, all under the protection of talking about just some printed message on paper.

The range of expression can run from raw emotion, restrained by appropriately softened words and sounds, to deeper expressions of the self as another being or thing with that being's viewpoint. For example, one angry young black in a poetry therapy group wrote:

> OK feelings make way for solid matter!
> Make way for doin' it now!
> Make way for screams and grunts
> And tables and chairs and clouds of putrid smoke—
> And bouncing words and pigs and even unseen events
> On the verge of pricking your damn tentacles...

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When asked by other group members what he was trying to say, he retorted, "That's just how I'm feelin', man!"

It shouldn't be a big shocker for us to realize that some expression is psychologically beneficial and not at all open to the rational analysis of the classroom. This black had simply grasped onto this truth and had used the medium of poetry and the group for a catharsis--possibly his first honest, straight-forward contact with expression in a controlled group like this one.

In another group, a 17 year old girl reflected more before expressing herself and came up with a more restrained statement of her emotional reactions, preferring to see herself as a grape and telling of her anticipated experiences in that image:

> I am the grapes
> entering the hands of others
> to be devoured.
> Each section to be taken off alone
> not connected with any other part
> of the plant--
> Continually giving to reaching arms,
> Always feeling the last grape is
> to be picked off the vine.
> Somehow more grapes keep
> growing.
> As long as I am a grape
> I hope always to keep growing
> But somewhere along the line,
> I'd like a raisin in return.

This very sensuous young teenager has captured several centuries of imagery in her assuming the person of the grape. But lest her interest in sensation and satifaction make her appear baccanalian, consider her unbounded optimism and her wonderful openness, clearly signifying a spiritual understanding of the natural world. Her group must have felt similarly uplifted by her wealth of feeling.

Neither of these examples were criticized in their groups for strength or weakness of poetic form, though the girl's work is clearly superior. Poetry therapists are on constant guard against group members with literary aspirations, for their over-concern with stylistics would engender a sense of artificial double-think, which would be put down by the group members. It is crucial in poetry therapy groups that everyone be able to feel where each member is coming from in his expressions. As poetry therapist Joanna Lessner explains, "the language must be easily and universally understandable. If it's got archaic or florid language, overly complex syntax and highly-structured verse, it's going to be ineffective" in the group.

And apparently poetry therapy is effective. In 1973, there were over 400 therapists treating 3500 drug addicts, alcoholics, and mental retardates around the country. In Pittsburgh's Dixmont State Hospital, for example, seven unreachable schizophrenics were treated for eight months of once-a-week poetry therapy sessions. At the end of this time, three were discharged from the hospital, and the other four were making regular home visits.

How does a poetry therapy session go? At present, there are several ways to run a session. First, you bring a carefully-chosen group together and provide them with poetry selections to read and respond to. In such a group the questioning proceeds along effective lines with "How did you feel about that?" and "Can you relate to what it's saying?" as subtle attempts to bring general impression and feelings out rather than specific skills in decoding.

Second, you can provide group members with a wide variety of poems of similar mood or topic; then, proceed to have one member read keying others to respond with selected poems of their own that express their reactions.

Third, you may have group members write poetry round robbin style, each of the members fitting in a line to flesh out the mood of the piece or adding a dissonant line to show his personal feelings.

Fourth, and possibly most difficult, is to have students express their feelings or moods in original work and to react to each other's work in original poetry written while the group carries on. For this, it would probably be necessary to review short, simple poetic forms such as haiku, tanka, cinquain, diamonds, clerihews, "I wish" expressions, and "I used to but now" reflections. These may be found in the very neat little book entitled Now Poetry from A. E. P. Xerox.

How does Poetry Therapy Fit the English Program? For openers, poetry therapy, in its pure sense, doesn't have much to do with the English program as presently conceived. The English teacher is already overburdened by a spate of time-consuming activities and a burgeoning demand for inservice preparation to specialize in the teaching of the new courses in elective curriculum programs. Moreover the English program is already struggling to keep up with course demands made upon it, all the way from career education to media literacy. Nonetheless, the best parts of poetry therapy are undeniably bound up in enlightened teaching strategies and course format.

If it's to be used at all, poetry therapy should be considered an attitude or frame of mind rather than a procedure in the classroom. Many teachers feel that "teaching" poetry means scanning meter or rhyme schemes, translating difficult images or fitting certain poems into established "schools." For them poetry therapy is counterproductive to their goals. Other teachers, however, see the English class as a forum in which the sharing of deep personal insights through poetic expression is the only

way to counteract the growing alienation engendered by an over-rational, de-personalizing society. For these teachers poetry therapy has already happened, coloring both their point of view and their methods of developing language sensitivity. In short, the therapeutic part of such experiences lies in the sense of student's participating in specially-crafted language perhaps for the first time permitting their authentic voice to come out.

All this aside, I propose that poetry therapy be considered in the following ways for the classroom.

--as a way to reach disadvantaged or under-achieving students--possibly those who may be considered functionally autistic, having been "blocked" in their desire to express themselves by early frustrating instruction.

--as a way to bring English faculty members together for a sensitizing retreat, several times during the school year. Instead of dry faculty meetings or dull inservice workshops, a poetry therapy session might be just what many English teachers need to rekindle the creativity and sensitivity that is deadened by school house routine.

--as a way to permit capable students in upper grades to reach lower grade students with sessions designed to evoke expression and language sensitivity.

--as an activity to carry on in English clubs or poetry clubs that meet as extra-curricular activities.

--as a way for talented students or motivated teachers to carry on social-service, people-helping projects with troubled adolescents in half-way houses or other facilities provided by the Division of Youth Services in our state.

--as an extremely humanistic method of getting into the study of poetry, emphasizing the naturalness of poetry for venting special feelings and for eliciting mood.

Obviously, all these suggestions stress the performing of poetry as much as rational analysis or emotional reaction. If for only this reason, a poetry therapy approach would be feasible. However, our times cry out for any means of emotional release--especially in the times of adolescent development. How many migranes, heart palpitations, or gastritis attacks might just be poems waiting to be born?

Reference

Chase, Janet "Poems Struggling to be Born." Human Behavior, August 1973, Manson, Western Corporation, Los Angeles, p. 24-28.